

Determinants of higher education participation for refugee background students: a systematic literature review

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper reports on a work-in-progress systematic literature review on the participation of refugee-background students in higher education within host countries. As scholarly attention to this topic has grown, especially in recent years, this study adopts a broad scope to identify legal, political, social and institutional determinants influencing both refugee students' access to and success in higher education. It aims to go beyond previous reviews, which either need updating or have more limited approaches. Preliminary findings show that most research has been produced in Anglophone countries, with Germany and Turkey as notable exceptions in Europe. The literature is predominantly qualitative and framed by social justice perspectives. While challenges such as legal status, language barriers and discrimination are well documented, the review also highlights a lack of attention to student agency. Final analyses, to be completed in the coming months, aim to provide a comprehensive framework of influencing factors.

Full paper

Introduction

The last decade's humanitarian crises provoked by conflicts in the Middle East, Ukraine and, more recently, Gaza have alerted the scientific community to the experiences of refugees, as they flee from their homes and arrive in host countries. Inclusion in the host education systems is one aspect that host countries must address.

Both educational policies and research have overlooked higher education (HE) compared to other education levels, although scholarly attention to the HE experiences of students from refugee background has grown recently. Among the most common challenges to successful participation, the following stand out: legal status (Eckhardt et al., 2017; Jungblut et al., 2020; Murray, 2022; Unangst, 2019), recognition of qualifications (Ashour, 2022; Gateley, 2015; Eckhardt et al., 2017), complex admission requirements (Gateley, 2015; Saiti & Chletsos, 2020; Schneider, 2018), lack of information and guidance (Gateley, 2015; Marcu, 2018), monolingualism (Ashour, 2022; Eckhardt et al., 2017; Jungblut et al., 2020; Marcu, 2018), hostility and prejudice (Kondakci et al., 2023; Murray & Gray, 2023), trauma (Ashour, 2022; Gateley, 2015) and poverty (Ashour, 2022; Saiti & Chletsos, 2020).

This paper reports on a systematic literature review, which is still work-in-progress. It aims to analyse the determinants of refugee students' participation in HE in their countries of first asylum or settlement, both regarding access and success. Previous reviews have addressed only one aspect, e.g. access (Arar, 2021), in a specific country context, e.g. Germany (Ashour, 2022) or at a time when research was still rather scarce (Ramsey & Baker, 2019). Research on refugee students has tended to focus on the challenges they face, while less attention has considered these students' agency and how they navigate these new environments, not simply as passive recipients. Thus, student agency is also considered a determinant of their participation in this study. The fast-growing literature on refugee students in HE calls for an up-to-date review, with a wide-encompassing approach, which can offer a comprehensive panorama of the determinants with influence the HE participation of refugee students. We therefore aim to answer the following research questions: *What are the legal, political, social and institutional factors that influence the participation of refugees in higher education in their host countries? How do refugee students perceive and deal with the challenges they face throughout their academic journey?*

Methodology

The systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA statement (Moher et al., 2010). Search terms, in English, were defined for the investigated group (e.g., refugee, forcibly-displaced student), the phenomenon (determinant, condition, challenge, obstacle, barrier, experience), and the context (higher education, university, tertiary education). The search was conducted in the Scopus and WoS databases in March 2025 and was limited to peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. It resulted in 581 studies, of which 105 were duplicates and were eliminated. The abstracts of the remaining 476 studies were screened and a decision was made to retain or exclude them, based on pre-defined inclusion criteria. Following this initial screening, 167 studies were retained for full-reading. Following this stage, 57 documents were eliminated for not falling within the review scope, e.g. they addressed HE in camps not settlement countries, they included

students in various education levels, etc.) and, for a limited number, because the full texts could not be obtained. This resulted in a provisional corpus of 110 papers.

Provisional findings

The large majority of studies in the review have been published in the last five years, testifying the recent surge of interest in the topic. The extant literature emerges with a high incidence in Anglophone countries, particularly Australia, the United States or the UK (e.g. Baker & Naidoo, 2024; Cureton & Aguinaldo, 2024). In continental Europe, the research panorama is arid. Except for Germany (e.g., Berg, 2020; Engelmeier et al., 2022), for most other countries we find only the occasional study(ies): e.g., Ireland (Farrell et al., 2020) Norway (Hauge et al., 2024) or Spain (Marcu, 2018). Turkey also emerges as a research hub on refugee students, most probably due to the large number of Syrian refugees (Cin & Doğan, 2021; Kondakci et al., 2023). With very few exceptions, the studies are qualitative, which is indicative of the difficulty of reaching this student group. A wide range of theoretical lenses are employed, but generally transpiring social justice concerns (postcolonial theory, critical race theory, Bourdieu's social theory, Sen's capabilities approach, etc.).

The substantive findings of the review regarding the factors which determine HE participation for refugee background students, considering both access and study success, are currently under analysis, but expected to be completed in the coming months.